THE HANDS OF ESAU

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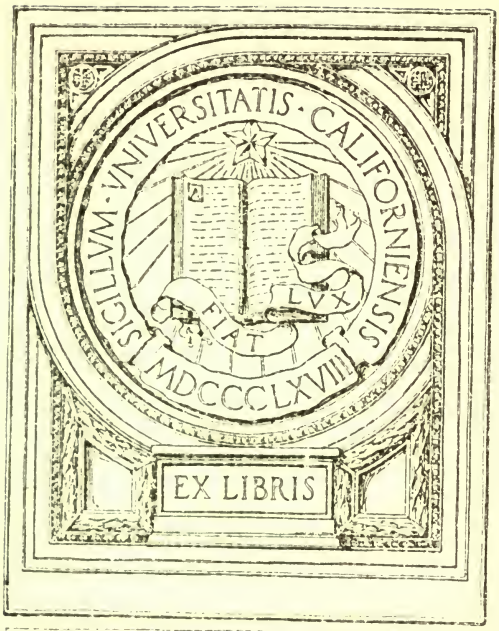
MARGARET DELAND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HE HAD LEFT THE BLUE PRINTS AND WAS STANDING BESIDE HER AT THE WINDOW

THE HANDS OF ESAU

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HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK

THE
HANDS OF ESAU

BY

MARGARET DELAND

ILLUSTRATED

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
MCMXIV

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER, 1914

H-O

TO
LORIN DELAND

MAY 12, 1914

442269

ILLUSTRATIONS

He Had Left the Blue Prints and was Standing beside Her at the Window — *Frontispiece*

"Tom Does Not Know It, I Know He Doesn't Know It. He Would Have Told Me" . . . . . *Facing p.* 44

THE HANDS OF ESAU

THE HANDS OF ESAU

CHAPTER I

"The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

TOM VAIL always fell on his feet.

"I was born lucky," he used to say, joyfully, to his mother. "The first stroke of luck was in having a bully father and mother; and I've kept it up ever since!"

"You are lucky now," his mother conceded, briefly.

"You bet I am!" he said; "to come here, a perfect stranger, and drop into the office of the biggest architect in town, and on twice the salary I had with Mr. Landors; I call that pretty darned lucky," the boy boasted, gaily.

"Did you tell Mr. Morgan why you left Mr. Landors's office?" his mother asked.

"No; why should I?"

"Well—" She hesitated.

But her son laughed. "I punched Bob Landors's head—because he deserved it; and of course I had to get out of his father's office. But what's the use of telling? It's my own business. You know I wasn't to blame!"

"No! You *weren't* to blame," she said. But she sighed. "Only, so long as Mr. Landors felt you were— Well, I wish you had told Mr. Morgan about it."

"It might have prejudiced him," Tom said, honestly.

"I wonder—" Mrs. Vail said; "are the Morgans New-Yorkers? Have they always lived here?" She looked at her son with gentle, half-frightened eyes. "I knew somebody called Morgan once."

"Common enough name," Tom said; "but I tell you what, they're not common people! He's the real thing, mother; and Miss Morgan is a peach."

He put his arm round the small, sad lady and gave her a squeeze that took her breath away; but she didn't laugh, as he meant she should. Mrs. Vail was not given to laughter.

"I have to do the laughing for the family," her son said once, a little ruefully, to the "peach," who was a somewhat haughty young creature, but who softened before such artless confidences into dimples.

"He's such a boy!" she told her father afterward. Her uncle, Judge Oliver Morgan, grumbled out from under his stiff white mustache that he wished he knew why girls always like to feel so much older than boys. "It works the other way round when they are women," he added, dryly.

"Oh, but he *is* younger; he's lots

younger than I am," Nina said; "he can't be more than twenty one or two, and I'm twenty-four."

"He's twenty-eight," her father corrected her.

"Gracious!" said Nina; and the next time she saw him she was less grandmotherly.

There was something about this charming youth with the candid and not too handsome face that made people feel an absurdly personal interest in him. Perhaps it was a sort of eager happiness that overflowed upon every one about him. Happiness is very winning! It won Vail's landlord—he had been adamant to Mrs. Vail's timid plea that the rent be lowered, but when her son suggested a cut of twenty-five per cent. he astonished himself by, as Tom expressed it, "coming down off his perch" and signing the lease. Mr. John Morgan was won by it, and before he knew it he had given the young man a place in his

office as draftsman. Miss Nina was won (though she was not aware of it) when she called one afternoon at her father's office and talked to his new draftsman for ten minutes while she waited for the "biggest architect in town." Judge Morgan had surrendered at once; though later he called himself an old fool, for his capitulation was so complete that he accepted Tom's invitation to a baseball game—and had a stiff back for twenty-four hours afterward.

The acquaintance between Nina Morgan and Tom, begun in that ten minutes in her father's office, turned into friendship with surprising suddenness. She had come to carry her father off to make a call, and "as usual," she said, he had forgotten his promise to be ready for her! He was shut up in his private office —"and Heaven knows when he will come out!" she said. "The new young man in the office"—which was Mr.

Morgan's way of referring to the draftsman he had just hired—was bending over some blue-prints, but he looked up and answered her despairing sigh with a most sympathetic smile:

"I'll go and tell him you are here."

She laughed and shook her head. "I'm used to it. Father always keeps me waiting."

She settled herself in a big chair by the window—a pretty creature, in a black hat with a pink rose under its flaring brim, and white furs pressing against very pink cheeks. Her face was good and sensible and as straightforward as a boy's—as, in fact, this particular boy's, who looked at her with unabashed admiration. At first they skirmished politely over the obvious: Colder than yesterday. Snow, probably, to-night. He hoped not; it would spoil the skating. She hoped so, because the dust was horrid—"though I shall be sorry to interfere with your skating," she con-

ceded; then they both laughed as if something witty had been said, and he declared that the country was enchanting in the snow. Which led naturally to the question, did he live in the country? He had left the blue-prints and was standing beside her at the window. Sometimes they looked at the panorama of the city spread before them—sky-scrapers looming up against a yellow winter sunset, puffs of white steam from innumerable escape-pipes, smoke-stacks of far-off steamers, glints, even, of the water. Sometimes they looked at these things, but oftener they looked at each other. . . . Yes; he lived out of town; his mother simply adored the country.

"Isn't it lonely for her?" Miss Morgan said, politely.

"No; she has her dog and her books. My mother is not strong," he said, soberly, "and she needs country air; but she isn't very dependent on people.

I don't believe she was ever lonely in her life."

Then Miss Nina Morgan surprised herself: "Perhaps she won't mind if I call on her some time?"

His face overflowed with pleasure. "It would be so very kind of you!"

It was at this moment that the head of the firm and his client came out of the inner office, which of course put an end to the conversation, but it left a tingle in both the young minds. . . .

"Papa," Nina said, snuggling up to him in the motor, "I'm going to ask him to come in to tea."

"Ask who?" her father said, absently; he was saying to himself that that client was the kind of fellow who would rather save the price of a cigar and use terazzo, than have the best marble that was ever walked on!

"Your new young man. I like him; he's so nice and straightforward. I love people who are straightforward."

"All right," said John Morgan; and made a mental note of another argument in favor of marble.

It was a month before the "biggest architect" awoke to the situation. Of course he knew that Mr. Vail had dropped in to tea once, twice, any number of times—he never kept tabs on Nina's tea-table! Once, he knew, four or five young people took his motor, when he particularly wanted to use it himself, to convoy themselves to a lake ten miles away for skating, and his "new young man" was among them; and once Nina informed him that she had called on Mrs. Vail.

"I'm going to ask them to dinner next week; she won't come, but he will. Please be at home, papa. There will be seven of us, four girls and three men; but you will make it fourteen! You are worth all the rest of us put together."

"Look here, Nina, aren't you piling it on a little?" Mr. Vail's employer de-

murred; "he's a nice enough chap, but I know nothing about him."

"*I* know everything. His mother is a dear."

"I'm a dear," said John Morgan; "but that doesn't prove that you are."

"Listen," his Nina said, brushing his newspaper aside and pulling his arm around her neck; "I'll tell you all about them. His mother was one of the Iowa Husseys."

"I can't say that conveys much to my mind," said Mr. Morgan.

"That's because you are ignorant. They were important people out there. His father is dead; he was a perfectly stunning person—"

"How do you know?"

"He told me so."

"How does he know?"

"His mother told him, of course."

"An absolutely unprejudiced opinion," Mr. Morgan said. "However, I

don't ask my young men to dinner because their fathers were 'stunning.' "

"Well, he was, anyway. He was a banker or something. I don't think he left much money; but of course that is of no importance."

"Oh, no; not at all," her father said, dryly.

"The thing I love about Tom—"

"*Tom!*"

"That is his name," Nina said; "Thomas Hussey Vail, to be exact. Oh, papa, how old-fashioned you are! We don't bother to say 'Mr.' nowadays. The thing I like about him is his frankness. He just blurts everything out. The second time I saw him we happened to speak of college; he said right off that he hadn't graduated. Some men would have kept that to themselves! They would have said it was nobody else's business. And, of course, in a way, it wasn't. But he is just as frank as they make 'em! I had

my nerve with me, and asked him why he hadn't graduated. He said he had to go to work. Of course I knew that meant so that he could take care of his mother. He has been perfectly splendid about taking care of his mother!"

"Nina, you needn't reinforce your concrete with mosquito-netting; it is generally expected that sons will take care of aged mothers."

"Wait till I tell you—of course I got it all out of him! He left college in his sophomore year and went to the Tech. It must have been an awful sacrifice—but he treats it as if it was nothing at all."

"Oh, he's a nice-enough fellow," her father admitted; "but be careful, Good-for-nothing."

He made up his mind to be a little careful himself. He had engaged Tom Vail on the impulse of the moment, because he had an honest face and a manly manner; he kept him because he

did good work and minded his business. Furthermore—John Morgan was a skeptical person and not given to discovering genius,—but there had been one or two indications that the boy had stuff in him. However, when Nina got this dinner-bee in her bonnet—"I must look him up," the architect said to his brother. "I've no doubt he's a nice lad, but I must look him up."

Judge Morgan, his back to the fire, chewing a cigar and spreading out his coat-tails to the genial warmth of the hearth, agreed. "You ought to have done it long ago."

These two gentlemen had nothing more important to think about in the whole world than this girl of theirs. They always thought of her as "theirs," though the Judge only came East three or four times a year, and so was obliged, reluctantly, to intrust her largely to her father. But he always kept a finger in the pie. "You ought to have looked

him up before he put a leg over your door-sill."

"Of course, when she began to notice him, I did ask him some questions," Nina's father defended himself.

The questions had been most genial and general, and the answers were of the same nature: "Where did I come from? I've come from so many places! My mother and I are rather rolling stones, I'm afraid, sir."

"Then you've seen a good deal of the world?" Mr. Morgan said, pleasantly.

"Well, no, sir; because, except for two years at college, and three years at the Poly, we've only lived in little places out West; South Bend was the biggest place I ever lived in—that was my first job. We were only there two years. I was in Landors's office there, sir."

"Oh, yes; I remember you told me so when you came into our office. I know Landors; he does good work," said John Morgan.

He repeated this conversation to the Judge, who said, sarcastically, that as a detective his brother would probably have made a great name. "You've missed your vocation, Johnny; ferreting things out is your lay! Well, I'll tap Landors, and *I'll* get some information."

He did the tapping the next time he was in South Bend, and learned nothing to the boy's discredit. "Came to us from the Polytechnical," said Vail's first employer; "very decent fellow. Works like the devil; he has a widowed mother on his back, and his one idea is to make things easy for her. Left us because he got into a scrimmage with my son; nothing of any consequence, though I think he was the aggressor; still, that may be the fond father's point of view. Anyhow, he found the office rather too hot to hold him. But he's all right."

Long before this, however, Nina had done her own detective work. . . . Her call on Mrs. Vail left her rather sober.

"She's perfectly sweet," she told her father that night at dinner, "but there's something so sad about her! And she sort of keeps you at arm's-length. I asked her to come in to tea some time, and she said she was almost never in town. Mr. Vail says she has never got over his father's death."

"When did he die?" Mr. Morgan asked.

"Oh, when he was a little boy."

"Who was a little boy? The father?"

"If you get funny, I won't talk to you."

"I asked merely for information. '*He*' is an intimate way of alluding to one of my draftsmen."

"Ah, now, daddy, listen! The father was a wonderful person. Tom says his mother can't bear, even yet, to talk about him, but all his life she has said just one thing, over and over: 'Keep your father's name honorable!' And he has! He speaks of him with a sort of—of reverence, don't you know?"

"The way you speak of me?" her father asked. She had left her place at the head of the table and come to sit beside him, one elbow on the arm of his chair, her face, absorbed and eager, close to his shoulder. He did not in the least know or care what she was saying; it was enough just to look at her. "You've got six freckles on your nose, Kitty," he told her.

"Oh," Nina said, despairingly, "how dreadful old people are! They can't be serious for two minutes at a time."

"Your uncle will be here to-morrow, and he'll be serious if you bore him about this young man."

"Pooh!" said Nina.

The Judge, arriving the next day and settling down for a visit, was not bored by talk of Tom Vail; but by the end of a week it had made him uneasy. "Has the fellow asked you if he might pay his addresses?" he said to his brother.

"Asked me? Lord, no! This isn't the dark ages of our youth, Olly; young men don't observe such small decencies nowadays. Come to life! Come to life!"

"But considering he's in your employ," the Judge persisted.

"Considering your grandmother," Nina's father said.

"Well," said the Judge, frowning, "I believe she's touched. I told her that Landors said he was all right; but she didn't care a copper for that; said she knew it without being told! But she said, 'Why didn't Tom tell me about the scrimmage?' '*Tom*,' if you please!"

"Oh, it's been 'Tom' for the last month."

The Judge whistled. "She spoke exactly as if she owned him! I said the scrimmage probably wasn't anything important. 'Oh,' says Miss Nina, 'I know he was in the right, whatever it was; but I think he ought to have told.' I believe she'll call him down,

which will make him think he's terribly important. Yes; she's touched. He's a nice enough fellow, but I'd like to know something about him. Let's go and call on the mother."

"What do *you* know about a girl's being 'touched'?" Nina's father scoffed; "you miserable old bachelor!"

"More than you do, evidently. If I didn't live three thousand miles away, I'd have called on the mother long ago."

"Nina has called; she talked me deaf about her."

"Nina! What does Nina know?" the Judge retorted. "She'd talk the leg off a brass monkey on any subject under heaven. I propose to see what sort of stock the fellow comes from, myself. I tell you what, you neglect that girl outrageously. I've a great mind to report you to the S. P. C. C. Let's call on the mother this afternoon."

"They're as poor as Job's turkey," said Mr. Morgan.

"That won't make any difference to Nina," said her uncle.

"Oh, not a particle; only, when it comes to calling on them, I wish their poverty did not take the form of living at the ends of the earth."

"Suburbs?" said the Judge, with a groan.

"Suburbs of suburbs; I wish you joy of getting there."

The Judge was to go West on the midnight train, so, if the call was to be made, there was nothing for it but to essay the ends of the earth that afternoon. Nina, hearing of their project, was apologetic at not accompanying them:

"I have to go to the Symphony with Nannie Davis—I'm so sorry! Tell Mrs. Vail I would have come if I could."

Nina's proprietary air made the Judge give his brother a dig in the ribs; to Nina, however, he only murmured, "'Nobody asked you, sir, she said'; so

don't worry." He was really doing some worrying himself; that long, cold ride in the motor proved the extent of his concern. "Confound it," he said, after half an hour of bumping over snowy roads, "why did you ever take a man into your office who lives in such a God-forsaken place?" It was very cold; the road was an almost unbroken expanse of snow. "Why didn't we come in a sleigh?" the Judge scolded. "If we get stuck in a drift—"

"Well, what did you come for, anyhow?" said Nina's father. "*I* didn't suggest it!"

"I came because I feel some responsibility about my niece," said the Judge.

The hind wheels of the big car suddenly revolved wildly, flinging up a cloud of snow. "Stuck!" said the Judge. "What did I tell you? Oh, Nina, how much I love thee!"

"I don't believe there is the slightest reason for this wild-goose chase,"

Mr. Morgan complained. "Hit her up, Charles!" he called to his chauffeur. "We'll be late for dinner," he said, sighing.

"I always thought you cared more for your wittles than for your daughter, Shylock. Gimme a light."

"Where in thunder is your own match-box?" his brother remonstrated.

"Lost it. Nina is always giving me match-boxes for Christmas presents, and I have to lose them to keep up with the game."

When Charles finally succeeded, with much crashing of gears, in backing out of the drift, they found themselves almost at the gate of Tom Vail's house. The astonishment of the maid who admitted them—adjuring a big sheep-dog padding along at her heels not to bark—showed how unusual visitors were; at any rate in such weather. The parlor, fragrant with blossoming hyacinths, and evidently swiftly vacated at

the sound of their ring, gave the brothers their first intimation as to Tom Vail's "stock."

"People of refinement," said John Morgan, with a satisfied glance.

"And no fools," said the Judge, pointing to the books; he even — although the dog nosed him suspiciously — lifted a volume which was lying open, a thread of pink embroidery-silk across the page, and looked at the title. "Whew! Look at that for light reading. I hope you brought your mind with you, John?"

Then they heard her step on the stairs and turned to greet her—a small, very shy, very pretty woman, with a charming but fluttered voice. She was pale when she entered, but when she looked into Judge Morgan's face she grew white to the lips. As for the Judge, he was suddenly silent; his brother had to do most of the talking. It ought to have been easy enough, for there was,

of course, one obvious topic. And yet even talk about Tom flagged unconscionably:

"My daughter Nina tells me Vail is of my college."

"He did not graduate, I am sorry to say," she said, quickly.

"But for an excellent reason," Nina's father declared, with generous appreciation in his voice.

Mrs. Vail hesitated. "He was not much of a scholar, I'm afraid. He couldn't keep up with his class."

"Ah, well," Mr. Morgan said, cordially, "you know all the great men were dunces at college—though Vail is far from being a dunce, now! If he keeps forging ahead as he has in the last six months he'll be my right-hand man in the office."

"I am glad," she said, briefly.

"Yes! we'll hear from him one of these days," Tom's employer went on, laboriously making conversation. She

smiled faintly; she was glad he was behaving himself, she said.

Her color did not come back, but her composure was perfect. She gave her callers their tea, condoled with them about the weather, admired their temerity in venturing upon so long a drive in the snow, was mortified because Bobs had barked at them; but all in as few words as possible. . . . When at last they rose to go her breath of relief was almost audible. At the parlor door she was careful to say good-by to John Morgan first; as he turned away and the Judge bowed silently over her hand, her fingers clung suddenly to his:

"Judge Morgan!" she said; then, in a whisper: "—*my son does not know.*"

"Madam, you may rely upon me," he answered, gravely. . . .

"She's charming," said Mr. Morgan, slamming the car door and pulling up the rugs; "charming! But, by Jove, she was on pins and needles to get rid

of us! What on earth was the matter? Must have been your looks that queered us, Olly."

"Gimme a light," said the Judge. He pulled out his cigar-case and bit off the end of a cigar.

"Confound you," his brother said, sticking out one plump leg and fumbling in his trousers pocket; "I wish Nina would give you a gross of match-cases! Olly, that woman has eyes like a dog when you have kicked him."

"I don't make a practice of kicking dogs," said Judge Morgan; "but I know what you mean. I've seen that look in my court-room, in women's eyes."

John Morgan's face suddenly sobered. "What's wrong? You don't mean to say—I can't believe—"

"Oh, Lord, no! Nothing wrong with *her*. I know her—or rather, I knew her. She is a fine creature; a fine, tragic, pathetic creature. But her husband was

my client. Indicted for embezzlement. I lost the case. He went to jail."

"By gad!" Nina's father said.

The Judge looked very much worried. "It's a serious business."

"I should say it was!"

"We can't have Nina marrying a man whose father—"

"No, we can't; but *she* can. She's perfectly capable of saying that she doesn't care a hang for the father. She'll say she's not marrying him."

The Judge was silent with dismay.

"Thank Heaven," said John Morgan, "that we've found it out before things went too far! Shall I take her to Europe?"

"If her heart's set on it, Europe won't stop her." Then he told his brother the whole story: A peculiarly ugly case. Not just good honest stealing, so to speak, but long-continued deceit. "He deceived *me*, his lawyer!" the Judge said. "Of course, that

showed him to be a fool, and me, too, I suppose; but I was young, and I'd known him a good while, and he was an attractive cuss; really a charming fellow—except that he was secretive. Detestable thing, secrecy. And vulgar, too. I call it the hall-mark of vulgarity. Yet to all intents and purposes the man was a gentleman. Well! he was senior warden in the little church, and trustee of two or three properties, which added to the prettiness of it all—widows' and orphans' savings, etc., etc. You know,—the old story. Yes; it was a nasty business. *She* was fine. She had some property, and gave it up—every cent. Heaven knows how she lived. Later I heard that her father left some money to educate the boy—this Tom. I fancy if it had been left to her she'd have handed it over to the widows and orphans, but she was helpless."

"I wonder how much Vail knows about it?" his brother said, pityingly.

"Nothing at all. Did you notice that she detained me? It was to tell me that he didn't know."

"He ought to know. He ought to have been told."

"Johnny," said the Judge, suddenly, "I understood Vail left college to go to work to support his mother. The noble son act. But it appears he was dropped."

John Morgan was silent. He was not interested in Tom Vail's scholarship; he was thinking about his girl. "She's as obstinate as you are, Oliver," he said, with a groan; "but maybe she'll listen to reason."

"Not if she's listened to Love first."

"Well, fortunately it hasn't gone as far as that. And a convict father-in-law doesn't sound attractive," Nina's father said, hopefully.

"Oh, he's not a convict now. He's dead safe enough. He was in for four-

teen years, but he died before he had served two. Lucky, all round. That poor lady—" He frowned, and fell into silence. His cigar went out, and this time he did not ask for a light.

CHAPTER II

THE winter twilight was falling on the snowy streets as Tom Vail walked briskly up-town. His head was bent a little to the wind, his hands were in his pockets, his collar turned up about his ears. His young face was set in somewhat pallid lines. . . . Suppose she was not at home? Or suppose, if she were at home, people should be calling? . . . Yet these possibilities were not what really scared him, because, of course, he could wait until she came in, or he could outstay the callers; but suppose—*suppose she should turn him down?* It was that possibility which sent his heart into his boots. And, after all, why shouldn't she turn him down? A girl like Nina (only there

never was a girl like her!), so wonderful, and clever, and good, and sweet— "Of course she'll turn me down!" he said.

He was very much in love and very humble, as the right kind of young fellow always is. He wished he amounted to something, for her sake. He knew her too well to worry over the fact that he was poor; any such fear would be an insult to her! And besides, he would not always be poor;—he knew his trade; he would make good! John Morgan had told Nina, who had told him, that "Vail had stuff in him." No; his poverty didn't trouble him — if only he amounted to more! He wished that he had done a hundred things—fantastic things of power and achievement; he even wished, frowning, that he had graduated. "What a fool I was not to stick to it and graduate!"

By the time he reached her door his heart had sunk very low. However, she *was* at home, and there were no callers;

and—and—perhaps she would *not* turn him down!

He found her in the dusky drawing-room, pushing the logs together in the fireplace. She had just come in out of the cold herself, and her face under the drooping feathers of her big hat was still glowing and her eyes shining—"like stars!" the young man told himself. The stars shone very kindly on him; yet a little timidly, too, and her voice—Nina's pleasant, matter-of-fact voice—had a sort of flutter in it.

"We'll — we'll have some tea," she said, after the first commonplaces. Then Tom blurted it all out:

"No! Please let's—just talk. Oh, Nina—"

"We can talk and have tea, too," she said, faintly; but she drew her hand back from the bell. Tom caught it in his own.

"*Nina!*" he said, again. Her smile was enough—but it was not all! There were tears trembling in her eyes; she

bit her red lower lip; the breath caught in her young throat, and her eyes plumbed his; then, very simply and solemnly, she held out her hands to him, and he leaned forward and kissed her. "I was so afraid you didn't care," he said in a whisper.

At which she laughed a little breathlessly: "How perfectly absurd!"

"But Nina, Nina — I am not good enough to black your boots! Nina, you are—there never was a girl like you!"

"Well, fortunately, I don't want a bootblack," she rallied him. Her eyes confessed words she would not say, but the happy tears were so ready to overflow that she had to build a little wall of jests to keep them back. "Of course, if I were looking for a bootblack, you wouldn't do."

"I thought you'd turn me down," he said, passionately.

"As if I could! As if any girl could!"

"I haven't anything to offer you but

love. Love, and hard work, and—and an honest name. We have awfully little money, Nina; but we are—I don't mean to be snobbish, but I—I do like you to know that my people are—all right, don't you know?"

Nestling into the tender, trembling hollow of his arm, she laughed at that; "Do you suppose I have to be told? You and your mother have placards hung all over you!"

"Mother's one ambition for me has been to keep my father's name clean. It was a great standard to put before a boy, and—I have, Nina."

"Do you think I need to be told?" she said, again, proudly. "Oh, I *love* your mother!"

Then they left fathers and mothers and talked about themselves. It was the old talk, which each lover supposes to be new:

"When did you first know you—cared?"

"When did you begin to see that I loved you?"

"Do you remember the day we went to Dillon's Lake to skate and you took Nannie Davis that long turn on the ice? I thought it was a mash."

"How could you think such a thing? As if there could be any other woman on earth for me!"

"Am I the first?"

"The first—and the last."

"Oh, don't think I'm small and jealous. I wouldn't mind if you'd been in love with six girls — if you'd tell me about them!"

"I should mind very much if you'd been in love with six men; and I wouldn't want to be told about them!"

"Well, I haven't. You are the first—and the last."

So it went on; the simple, silly joyousness. Tea came in, and they both sat up very straight, and, while the maid arranged the tray, spoke with a formality

that caused that astute young woman great difficulty in keeping her face straight; indeed it even suggested to her that if she lingered in the hall, rearranging the coats, she might be able, later, to tell the kitchen that it was all settled. . . .

There was only one rather serious moment. Nina hesitated, then burst out: "Tom! I'm going to be perfectly honest with you. I'm always going to tell you—everything! You've done just one little silly thing I don't like—*I'm* silly, I suppose. Mr. Landors told uncle that you'd had a scrimmage with his son; he admitted it wasn't anything important, though, like a narrow-minded donkey, he sided with his son. But of course *I* knew that the son was entirely to blame. Only I wished you had told father about it when you came to our office. No; I don't want to hear a word about it now! I knew you were entirely right, whatever you did; I told

uncle so. Only I hate—not telling things. There! Now I've told you. It's the only thing I haven't *loved* about you, and I just had to tell you."

"But Nina, I—"

She put her hand over his lips. "I don't want to hear what it was; I don't care!"

But he insisted on explaining that the scrimmage might have prejudiced her father: "And truly, Nina, Bob Landors was an awful pup. I *had* to punch his head. Even mother admitted that."

"Of course you had to! If you'd killed him, I should have known it was all right. I trust you absolutely. It was only the—the not telling, that bothered me."

"But, Nina, I wasn't to blame—" The confused distress in his face made her laugh.

"Good gracious, you seem to think I mind your punching his head! Haven't I told you? I rather like it!"

He looked perfectly bewildered; it

was evident that he did not quite understand her, for his one idea seemed to be to prove himself in the right as to the quarrel. Indeed, his repeated explanations kept him so late that when, at last, he started for his train (stopping on the way to buy some flowers for his mother) it was necessary for him to sprint for the last three blocks; and when, with a running jump, he landed on the rear platform of the last car he was panting like a racing puppy. But he was smiling all over his face—she had forgiven him for getting into a scrimmage; she loved him; she had promised to marry him!"

When he swung off the train, into the snowy darkness of the country road, he ran all the way to his own house, he was so eager to get home and tell his mother. But when he burst into the small, fire-lit parlor, stumbling over Bobs sleeping in the doorway, Mrs. Vail was not there to welcome him.

"She's lying down, sir; she has a headache," the maid told him. And Tom, contrite at the noisy exuberance of his entrance, and worried, too, at another of those wearing headaches, tiptoed up-stairs to the darkened room.

She was awake and feeling better, she said, burying her flushed face in the wet fragrance of his carnations. Yes; the two gentlemen had called. Yes—perhaps they had tired her a little. Did she like Mr. Morgan? Oh, very much. And the Judge? "Why, of course."

"Are you able to—to hear something wonderful, mother darling?" he asked, smiling to himself in the darkness. Her frail hand, resting in his warm young paw, suddenly shivered.

"Oh—Tom, *what?*"

"Something wonderful. The best thing in the world!"

Her hand relaxed, and there was a long breath.

"Yes, dear. Of course. I should like to hear something pleasant."

Then he told her. In the darkness, and in his joy, he did not notice her silence. When she did speak, she said all a mother could; she echoed, in her gentle, tired voice, all his rhapsodies, repeated all his adjectives, confirmed all his hopes. Then, with a little gasp of weariness, she told him to go downstairs and get his supper:

"I won't come down to-night, darling; my head is still a little unsteady. But I shall be happy just lying here thinking of your happiness." As he left the room she called him back; it was to repeat the old entreaty which he had heard all his life. "Tom, promise me: *make your father's name honored.*"

The words seemed very solemn to him now. For a moment he did not speak; then he kissed her hand.

"Yes, mother," he said, simply.

CHAPTER III

IT was Judge Morgan's sensible habit, when he took the midnight "flier" for the West, to saunter over to the station at about ten and get some sleep before the train pulled out. But of course this business of Nina's interfered with such excellent arrangements. When her father and uncle got home—too late to dress, they told each other, with that satisfaction peculiar to their sex—Nina had met them in the hall with a silent, ecstatic hug:

"Father! What do you think? Uncle! Darling! Something has happened. You'll never guess!"

"How many guesses do you give us?" the Judge said.

She had drawn them into the library,

hardly allowing them time to take their coats off. She took a hand of each and pulled them down on the sofa, one on either side of her. "Father!" she said. Then, for once, the straightforward Nina stammered a little and seemed unable to go on with her story. "Father, you won't mind? You'll be pleased? Uncle, say you'll be pleased."

"I don't judge a case before I hear it," her uncle said.

"As for me, I shall probably be exceedingly displeased," her father assured her. "Anything that delays dinner displeases me."

"He is simply—*perfect!*" Nina said. "I don't know what you've either of you done to deserve such a son and nephew."

"Good Lord!" said John Morgan.

"Jack, we're dished," said the Judge.

"It's Tom," said Nina.

They were both silent.

"I knew you'd be dumb with astonishment; I knew you hadn't the re-

motest idea! Well, I wasn't *sure* myself until—this afternoon. It was this afternoon—while you were calling on his mother. It was so lucky you two dears were out! Father, say you are pleased! Uncle! Why are you both such dumbbies? How unsympathetic you are!"

Her father put his arm round her and kissed her. "Nina, your happiness is the dearest thing in the world to me. Vail is a good fellow, but—"

She drew away from him with an amazed look. "Father! You are not pleased?"

Judge Morgan got on his feet and held out his hand to his niece; as she rose he put his hands on her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. "Nina, I expect you to be a man. Now, listen: We like Mr. Vail; he is all right. But his father—wasn't."

"Uncle! . . . what do you mean?"

"Nina, dear, he was a criminal. He died in prison."

"TOM DOES NOT KNOW IT, I *KNOW* HE DOESN'T KNOW IT. HE WOULD HAVE TOLD ME"

There was a moment of silence. Nina sat down, and her father put his arm around her. Then she said, whitely: "Tom does not know it. I *know* he doesn't know it. He would have told me if he knew it."

"No; he doesn't know," John Morgan said, gently. And again there was a moment's silence. Then Nina said:

"Of course—it can't make any difference."

"We must talk it over, dear," her father said; "you will not deny that it is a serious matter."

"No; I won't deny that," she said. Then she lifted her young head in a sort of challenge: "Father, it would kill me to do anything that didn't please you and uncle; so you must be pleased. Because, *I shall marry him.* You must be pleased!"

"Your father would not be pleased to have the Angel Gabriel for a son-in-law if his dinner was delayed," said

the Judge. "Come!" And he walked out to the dining-room with his arm around her waist. John Morgan followed silently. He was very much upset.

Dinner was rather silent, though Nina made heroic efforts to be careless, and her uncle equally heroic efforts to be cheerful; John Morgan made no effort at all, either to talk or to eat. After dinner, in the library, of course it was all talked out. . . . But, as her father had expected, it was a foregone conclusion. They told her the whole story; they pointed out the gravity of what she proposed to do; they were plain-spoken to the point where, being rather old-fashioned gentlemen, they both blushed: "Tom has that man's blood in him; Tom's children may have the taint, even if Tom doesn't."

But it was just as they feared—when Nina made up her mind there was no moving her. Her mind had been made

up in that glowing hour when Tom Vail had kissed her, and nothing that his father had done or that her father could say made any difference to her. "I'm not going to marry—Mr. Vail," she said; and as for any "taints"— "Nonsense!" said Nina, simply, leaving all the blushes to the two gentlemen. "I love you both—very, very much; almost as much as I love Tom, but not quite. So there is no use talking." She rubbed her cheek against her father's and laughed softly; but her face was entirely determined. She showed very little interest in the details of the elder Vail's behavior. Her chief concern was why and how Mrs. Vail had hidden the facts from Tom. "It wasn't right," she said; "secrets are never right! Tom ought to have known —oh, for ever so many reasons. Suppose, instead of being the kind of man he is, he had inherited his father's— nature; suppose *he* had been deceitful;

oughtn't he to have been told what deceit might lead to? Of course he ought! I understand how poor Mrs. Vail felt, but oh, she ought to have told him!"

"Well, we can't tell him," her uncle reminded her.

"No; we can't tell him," Nina said, soberly. Then the color came softly up into her face. "I can't tell him, *now;* I wouldn't have him know, now, for the world; he might feel that—he ought not to have asked me, or some such foolishness. But when—when we are married, I shall tell him. I couldn't have a secret from him. And then he will know that *nothing* could make any difference to me! I mean nothing like that. The things that could make a difference—" her face was suddenly radiant, but for the first time that evening her eyes filled—"the things that could make a difference couldn't happen." Then, very gently and gravely, she

kissed them both good night and left them.

The two gentlemen looked at each other. "Isn't it queer," said Judge Morgan; "up to noon to-day, that girl loved you better than anybody in the world; and me next best; then she has five minutes' talk with that cub—and she whistles us down the wind!"

Nina's father nodded, absently. "Oh, well, that's life. As for Vail, I suppose we've just got to make the best of it."

"No; she'll make the best of it," the Judge said, cynically; "she'll forget. We'll get the worst of it, because we'll remember. . . . Johnny, why did he hold his tongue about college?"

"Oh, I don't mind that; it's his own business. Besides, it isn't one of the deadly sins to lose your sheepskin. I only squeaked through myself. Yes, he's a good fellow," John Morgan said, sighing. "I like Vail. I like him thoroughly. But I do wish—"

"So do I," said the Judge.

After that they talked of other things, and then the Judge started for the station.

"That good-for-nothing daughter of yours has lost me two hours' sleep," he said, plunging into his overcoat. "Ask her," he called back from the foot of the steps, "what she wants for a wedding present!"

CHAPTER IV

BUT there was no talk of the wedding just then. First because Mrs. Vail was far from well. "And besides that—I'm not going to live on my wife," Tom said. "I've got to have a decent income before I get married." And not only his prospective father-in-law, but the prospective wife, too, liked him the better for such reluctance.

The next few months was a time of tempered happiness to the lovers, for Mrs. Vail gradually faded out of life. Nina came very close to the little, silent soul in the last weeks—so close that once, very near the end, Mrs. Vail, looking at her with those eyes of a beaten dog, whispered:

"Nina, *you* know?"

Nina, holding the dying hand to her lips, said, tenderly, "Yes, darling."

"It makes no difference?"

"No difference in the world."

"Shall you tell him, ever?"

"I couldn't have a secret from him, Mrs. Vail. You wouldn't want me to have a secret?"

There was a long silence; the weary eyelids closed, and Nina thought she slept; then suddenly the eyes flashed open and looked at her with mournful fixity. "No; no secrets. His father had—secrets. And I, too—this one; only this one. . . . Nina, I didn't tell Tom a lie. I only told him to keep his father's name clean, and he thought—"

"Yes, dear," Nina said, comfortingly; "I understand."

She did not speak of it again, or, indeed, of anything else. She just slept out of life. . . .

Sorrow brought the lovers very close together, as it almost always does.

Probably no husbands and wives are so truly wedded as those who have kissed one another beside a dead child. No lovers fully understand love until they have mingled their tears as well as their kisses. Nina came to know Tom pitifully well in those first days of his bereavement. She knew the depth of his love for his mother; she even knew, and the knowledge brought a curiously maternal look into her young face, how he had depended upon his mother for courage and endurance. Her father and uncle knew this, too. "John," the Judge said once to his brother, "I am afraid the gray mare is going to be the better horse?"

"But those marriages are often very happy," Nina's father protested, rather weakly.

"Well—yes," the Judge agreed; "but I wish—"

"So do I," said John Morgan.

Still, they were fairly contented. Vail

was a good fellow, a fine fellow; and Nina was happy. "And, after all, that is the main thing," said Judge Morgan.

"I think," Nina told her father, a few weeks after Mrs. Vail's death, "that Tom might consent to be married now. It's all well enough to have a 'proper pride,' but he's so dreadfully lonely. Nobody but old Bobs to speak to at home."

"'At home'?" said her father. "I'd like to know how much he is 'at home'? He's here the greater part of the time—not but what he's welcome. Tom is a mighty nice fellow."

"What did I tell you?" said Nina, proudly. "You and uncle ought to get down on your knees and thank me for bringing him into the family."

"Unfortunately, I have a football knee," John Morgan said. "Kitty, it occurs to me that I can soothe your young man's sensibilities by putting him on a job—that is, if you can bear to be

parted for three months? It's in Ainsville, Iowa."

Nina's face fell, but it was only for a minute. As for Tom, his face beamed. "Will I take a three-months' job? You bet I will, Mr. Morgan! May I have Nina when I get back?"

"She's waiting to jump down your throat," Nina assured him. "I'll take care of Bobs while you're gone; and I'll make up my mind what uncle shall give us for a wedding present."

So it was arranged, and Vail, representing the John Morgan firm in a Western town, received a salary that made it quite possible for him to marry as soon as Nina was ready.

"I shall be back the first of May—we will be married on the second," he whispered; but she, glowing, and suddenly retreating from that readiness to jump down his throat, declared it could not be until June, the end of June! She couldn't possibly get ready before that!

So Tom, a little rueful at the delay, betook himself to Ainsville and settled down to hard and happy work in the straggling, ugly little town—a town of muddy streets and jig-saw houses and one-night theater companies. That three months of separation was a time of deepening love in them both and of much happiness, too, not only because of all the preparations for the wedding and the delicious melancholies of loneliness, but because absence gave them the chance—always so little appreciated at the time and so much appreciated when it is over!—of writing to each other. Every day the letters went back and forth. They never knew (we never knew when we ourselves were treading that same primrose path of ecstasies and confidences!) how charming, how absurd, and how pathetic love letters are. Every night Tom used to sit down at the long, ink-spattered table in the big, bare office of the hotel and sink himself

in reporting the details of his day. "Tell me every blessed thing!" Nina had charged him; and he told her—How the plasterers nearly drove him to drink! How a crack in the reinforced concrete of one section of his wall scared the stuffing out of him, etc., etc. In return he heard what simple *beasts* dressmakers were, and that uncle had meant to give her diamonds, but she thought a rug would be better, "a really stunning one, of course." After the fashion of their generation, allusions to love were rather scarce; but what complete and joyous love it all meant—the recording of the cracks in the concrete, the wickedness of dressmakers, the colors of rugs! As for Nina, she would not, she said, have lost a single shingle-nail out of Tom's daily reports; and Tom was frowningly anxious to know whether the library should be in leather or velours. "Leather will certainly wear better," Nina wrote, "but, darn

it! it fades." Night after night Tom would hang around the office desk, waiting for the mail, so absorbed in the question of leather or velours (or whatever else Nina might happen to be agonizing over) that the loungers in the cane-seated chairs would wink at one another, and the clerk, with the easy intimacy of a Western hotel, would joke a little while he was sorting out the letters: "Say, Mr. Vail, I guess she's forgot you this time!"—For of course Mr. Vail's correspondence, with its betraying feminine hand, had declared his state in the first three or four days. Tom, a joyous target for the rough and friendly humor, was always ready with a retort in kind; which explained why everybody liked him here in Ainsville, just as they had liked him in the East.

Once—it was toward the end of April—a new-comer at the hotel, leaning lazily against the desk, entered into the jollying with a grin, and when the young

architect, with his letter in his hand, rushed back to the writing table, he said to the clerk that the young feller had got it bad.

"Well, yes, he has," that gentleman said, chuckling; and told how once, last week, the "young feller" had walked to the post-office at twelve o'clock at night to see if there was a letter for him in the midnight mail. "It didn't show up in the evening delivery," the clerk said, "but he wasn't going to let the night go by without hearing from her. Yes, he's got it bad. Well, he's as nice as they make 'em. I hope she's good enough for him."

"Let's see. You called him Vail, didn't you?" the guest said; and after a while he strolled over to the table and sat down beside Tom, watching him fold his letter up and put it back in the envelope.

"Your name's rather familiar to me," he said.

Tom, still absorbed in the bad habits of leather, said, absently, "Really?"

"Yes, sir," the man said, and spat carefully into a box of sawdust. "I knew a Thomas Vail once."

Tom was instantly interested. "I wonder if it was any relation of mine?"

"Well, no, I guess not," the man said, dryly; "I hope not, anyway. Damn him!"

"Oh," Tom said, laughing; "well, I hope not, too, if he affects you that way. Bad egg?"

"Rotten," said the other, dully; "he ought to have been hung; he was only put in prison."

"Well, I haven't any convict relations," Tom said, pleasantly. The man had been drinking and his forlornness was obvious. "Poor devil!" Tom said to himself, and offered him a cigar.

"Thank you. Yes; his name was the same as yours. Well, my boy, if you don't mind my saying so, that name has been well cursed out in my town."

"What did he do?" Tom asked, yawning; but his voice was so kindly that the man pulled his chair up a little nearer. Tom looked at him. "Guess he's got a chatty jag on," he thought, good-naturedly; "it will cheer him up to talk." With Nina's letter warm in his inside pocket Tom was ready to cheer anybody up, especially if it only meant letting 'em drool on about themselves. "Sorry anybody of my name 'did' you," he said.

The man, smoking Tom's cigar, declared that the bearer of his name "did him" for all he was worth. Yes; he was a "bad egg." He himself was only one of many who had suffered by him. It was mostly in Davenport that he did 'em.

"There's people there who used to ride in their carriages, and now they walk in ragged shoes, thanks to this slob Vail. Before we got on to his curves —he was one of them Sunday-school

teachers; you know the kind?—worst kind of all! A pious sinner. To hell with pious sinners, I say! Yes, before he was found out, he had squeezed folks that used to ride in their carriages —their barouches, I tell you. He picked their pockets of a quarter of a million dollars! What do you think of that?"

"Must have been a smart fellow," Tom said, grinning; "I can't claim brains like that. Guess we're not relations."

"Well, we found him out," the man went on. "He was tried, in Davenport. You can read about it, if you want to, in the records, and he got fourteen years; but we didn't get our money! No, sir, nor our carriages. All gone! All gone. Well, his wife, she was a Davenport girl; she was a Hussey"—Tom turned and looked at him, his lips falling apart—"she had money, her folks was wealthy people; and she gave up every red cent she had. But what

did it amount to on quarter of a million dollars? He'd swallowed up all *my* savings, fifty-four hundred dollars, and what did a dollar or two back on that mean to me? Not but what she done her best—and she had a young one to support, too. I believe her father looked after him. Well, I give her credit for having done right. The Husseys was always square people, I've been told; and—" He broke off, abruptly: "Goin' to turn in?"

"Yes," Tom said. He had gathered up his papers, and was leaving the table, but came back, fumbling in his breast pocket. "Here's another cigar for you," he said.

The man took it eagerly, waving maudlin thanks. "*You're* all right, if you are named Vail!"

On his way up to his room Tom heard himself replying to the elevator-boy's comments on the weather; he even, at the boy's suggestion, read the

weather report; "*rain and clearing.*" "How can it rain and clear at the same time?" said the boy; "that's what I'd like to know."

"It would be a hard job," Tom heard himself say. Then the iron door clattered back, and he was in the long, musty hall; he noticed, as he put the key into the lock of his door, that his hand was shaking. In his room, dropping his papers on the marble-topped center-table, he found himself saying aloud: "It's impossible. It's absolutely impossible." Yet even while he denied the possibility, he knew that it was so. "Hussey is not an unusual name," he insisted, trembling; "there must be lots of mother's cousins in Davenport. One of them must have married somebody called Vail, and he was the—the man. Of course that's it." . . .

His hand was still shaking while he struck a match and lit the gas; as he did it, he had a glimpse of his face in

the mirror, and started, it was so ghastly white. *Nina!*— What would Nina do if she should hear this? If she had known it when he asked her to marry him, she would never have taken him! "But it isn't true. I know it isn't true!"

He sat down, tingling from head to foot. Suddenly a wave of tenderness for his mother swept over him. "Poor mother. Oh, now I understand!" His understanding pity gave him an almost physical distress; then pity ceased abruptly, swept away by a strange, impotent anger; "She ought to have told me! She ought to have told me! . . . If it had been true, she ought to have told me. But it isn't true; that's why she didn't tell me. It is merely a coincidence."

He got up and walked about the room. "Hussey is not an uncommon name, and Vail is quite a common one; that mother came from Davenport proves

nothing. Yes; it is all a coincidence." He sat down; then got up and again tramped about the room. He could not keep still; it seemed to him that he could not wait until morning to find out —to find out that it was nothing but a coincidence.

There was no sleep for him that night —only one panic thought: *Nina!*

CHAPTER V

THE last week in April was illuminated for Nina because her uncle had written her that he was coming East, and on his way he would stop for a few hours in Ainsville, to see, as he expressed it, "what mischief Tom was up to." The prospect of seeing some one who had just seen Tom was very exciting, but Nina's happiness was dampened by the fact that just about that time she had three letterless days.

"I know uncle will tell me how he is," she said to her father at breakfast, on the morning that the Judge was to arrive; "but if I don't get a letter on this delivery, I'll telegraph."

"Goose!" said John Morgan. "Your uncle will be here in fifteen minutes."

"But it was three days ago that he saw Tom," Nina worried. "Anything can happen in three days! Father, may I have the car this morning? I want to take uncle to pick out the rug— Oh, here are the letters! Yes—he's written!" She pounced upon a letter from Tom and was instantly absorbed in it, murmuring extracts from it as she went along, to enlighten her father: "He has been awfully busy . . . Had to go to Davenport to see a man. Wretch! He doesn't say what about . . . Dreadful weather . . . Up to his ears in electric wiring . . . Headache night before last. Oh, dear, do you suppose he is sick? Those Western towns are simply chockfull of typhoid. I've a great mind to telegraph him to go and see a doctor."

"I shall telegraph for a brain specialist for you," her father said. "Now, do hold your tongue for five minutes and let me read my paper."

"I'm glad uncle is coming, he is so

much more sympathetic," said Nina, putting Tom's letter in her belt. Her face was quite sunny again in spite of her forebodings about typhoid. Then she pushed her father's paper away, and began to spread samples of white satin on his coat-sleeve. "They show up better on something dark; do you like this dead white best, or the cream?"

"We use cream on all outside woodwork," said the architect, "with lots of Calcutta oil in it."

They were still at table, and John Morgan was snatching paragraphs of news between scraps of white satin, when the Judge came tramping in, looking a little disheveled from a night in the sleeping-car.

"Hullo, Jack! Give me a cup of coffee instantly, Nina. Well, how are you all?"

"We are going to have a consultation because Tom had a headache last week," John Morgan said; and Nina, kissing

the Judge, and fussing about grape-fruit and hot toast, paused to fling back some merry impudence.

"He is not *in articulo mortis*, anyhow," the Judge declared; "he was able to travel last week."

"Oh, uncle! Was he in Davenport when you stopped in Ainsville? How dreadful!"

"He was; but I heard at the hotel that he was able to eat his three meals a day. Give me another cup of coffee, Skeesics. Well, I didn't see him, but I've something to tell you—unless, perhaps, you know it already? Has Tom written you about it?"

"About what? Only his headache," she said, quickly. "Uncle! He *is* ill?"

"Nina, don't be silly. Of course he isn't. It is only that he—I think he has got on the trail of that father of his."

"Uncle!"

"Yes; I came up against one of the victims; he was leaving Ainsville on

my train. Of course he knew me and we got into conversation. He told me he'd 'met a man called Vail.' It gave me a start. *He* didn't know, of course, who Tom was; but he told me what he had told him. Isn't it queer how small the world is? I hadn't thought of that case for fifteen years until your father and I went to see poor Mrs. Vail; and now I run up against another reminder of it!"

"Oh, poor Tom—my poor Tom!" Nina said, passionately. The tears stood in her eyes while the Judge told the story. Her one thought as she listened was how she should help Tom bear the bitter knowledge—she could not save him from it. His ideal of his father had already been destroyed. No; she could not save him. All she could do was to love him. As the Judge talked she turned away and looked out of the window; the two men behind her winced at a little sound—Nina was not

the crying kind, and they were not used to that sound. But she had herself in hand in a minute.

"The only thing I have to think of is how I am to make him realize that it doesn't make any difference," she said, cheerfully; "not one single little bit of difference! When he knows I've known it for six months, he'll understand how unimportant it is."

"Nina," the Judge said, "I want you to do something for me; I want you to let him tell you about it."

"Why, of course—"

"I mean, don't let him know you know it; let him tell you. It is his right, my dear."

She was silent; the Judge looked at her very keenly.

"I was just going up-stairs to write to him," she said.

"I knew you were; and I don't want you to. He ought to have the chance to tell you."

"Chance to tell me! Why, a letter is on the way now. I'm perfectly sure of it. I only wanted him to know that I—"

"Let him speak first, Nina;—I'm right, John?" he interrupted himself, turning to his brother, who had listened with a puzzled look.

"Yes," John Morgan said, "I guess you are."

But when the two gentlemen were alone, he did not speak so positively. "Just what did you mean by that, Olly? If Tom doesn't come up to the scratch and tell her all about it, it's going to be rather a blow to Nina."

"Well, I'd rather have her hit now, once, *hard*, than have a succession of blows all her life."

Nina's father was very sober. "By gad!" he said; and then, a minute later, "these experiments take the starch out of me. I hope he'll tell her."

He had two weeks in which to do so,

by writing; but there was no hint of it in any of his letters. Nina, at first a little surprised, decided, as she brooded over his speechless pain, that he could not put the dreadful fact on paper. He needed, she thought, her eyes softening like a mother bird's, he needed to be near her, to feel her arms about him, to hide his shamed and grieving face on her shoulder. She never had loved him so much as in those weeks of confessing silence. His letters came regularly enough, but they were different—shorter, less merry, more business-like. "But I understand," Nina told herself, very tenderly.

He was to come back early in May, and the wedding—a very quiet wedding, of course—was fixed for the twentieth of June.

CHAPTER VI

BY the time Tom Vail got home Nina had thought out just how she should receive his tragic news. At first she had vibrated between treating it rather casually, as: "Why, Tom, dear, I knew it ages ago! It is so sad; but we shall never think of it again." Or treating it solemnly, in accord with the seriousness with which he was evidently regarding it himself: "Darling, I suffer just as you do. But we are only going to think of him tenderly, because he must have been so unhappy." ("Only he wasn't. Uncle said he didn't believe he had any remorse at all. Well, *that* can't be said—at any rate at present.")

Her final decision was to let Tom strike the note—and then stand by with love and comfort.

When at last he came, in the twilight, springing up the front steps and bursting into the drawing-room, a square, purple box tied with lavender ribbons in one hand, she was trembling with love and terror. Bobs bounded about him, barking with joy, but Nina could hardly speak; certainly she could not fling back his gay rejoicings with her usual light archness. He caught her in his arms and kissed her, then broke away to tear open the purple box and bring out of its sheets of oiled paper an enormous bunch of violets.

"Down Bobs, down, old man! Behave yourself!" Then he kissed her again, and declared he had so many things to tell her he didn't know where to begin.

"Begin at the beginning," she said, and sat down on a very little sofa, a sofa that only held two; but he was so bubbling over with happiness that he could not sit down. He knelt beside her, and, holding her hand, took a little

calendar out of his pocket and showed her how he had crossed off each day that they had been separated.

"There are only forty-three more until the twentieth," he said, passionately, and held her fingers against his lips. "Nina, it seemed as if those three months would never pass! I lived on your letters; you never missed a day."

"*You* did—the time you went to Davenport."

"Yes," Tom said; he got on his feet and sat down beside her. "But if you knew how busy I was just then, you'd forgive me."

"Oh, I forgave you," she said. In her tenderness she put her arm about him and drew him toward her. He thrilled at the soft passion in her eyes. "Tom."

"Yes?"

"Tell me—tell me everything."

"I told you so many business things

I was afraid I'd bore you. Did I, Nina?"

"Bore me? Never! I want to hear everything that has happened to you, every minute."

"Golly! That's a large order. Besides, I want to hear everything that has happened to you, every minute. Nina! Is the dress done?"

"Yes; but begin! Begin! About Ainsville."

"It's nothing but work, and you know all about that." But with all the enthusiasm of the man who loves his work, he burst into repetitions. He gave her endless details of his job, his difficulties, his triumphs, his worries; and, over and over, his loneliness. "I missed you dreadfully, Nina. There were times when I wanted to cut it all and run back. And—I missed mother."

"I know, I know," she told him, softly, looking at him with waiting eyes.

"I should even have been glad to

have had old Bobs," he said, as the dog put his chin on Nina's knee and looked up into her face.

Nina was silent; then she said, "Yes?"

"You aren't telling me things," he reproached her.

"Nothing interesting has happened to me," she said. She put her hand on Bobs' shaggy head, and brushed his mop of hair away from his beautiful, serious eyes.

"I wish you'd pay attention to me," Tom complained, laughing. "Look into *my* eyes!"

She did look, with an intensity that confused him. He was suddenly self-conscious; he began to make conversation; he asked innumerable questions, all those practical questions that lovers love to ask, just to hear the beloved's voice, but the constraint in her answers made him less and less at ease; certainly, a minute after she gave him the

figures he could not remember whether Judge Morgan's rug was twelve by fifteen or ten by twelve. Once she failed entirely to reply to something he said, and he gave her a startled look.

"Nina, you are pale. Are you tired? Have you a headache?"

"A little headache," she said; she tried to smile, but the muscles about her lips felt stiff.

"Dearest, you must go and lie down. Nina, please! You worry me."

"Haven't you anything more to tell me?" she said, in a whisper; "*anything?*"

"Only that I love you. Oh, Nina—how I love you!"

"Do you?" she said, listlessly. Then, abruptly, she rose to her feet; she made a curious gesture of finality.

"Why, Nina!" he said, blankly. "What is the matter, dear?"

"Nothing," she said. She let him take her hand and kiss it.

"Nina, there *is* something the matter. Have I—have I offended you? Nina! What is it?"

She had turned to leave the room, but came back, and, clutching his shoulders with unsteady hands, stood, trembling very much, looking into his eyes. "You —you have nothing more to tell me?"

"Dearest! *Nothing*. Do go and lie down. You worry me to death."

Her hands dropped at her sides, and she drew a long breath; then stood gazing at him—that tragic gaze one fixes on a face soon to be covered by a coffin-lid.

"Good-by, Tom," she said; and went away.

He followed her into the hall, insisting that she must tell him what was the matter; but she did not speak, and when he caught her hand she broke away from him and fled up-stairs. He heard a door close, and knew that she would not come back. He went into

the parlor, and stood looking about him, at the crumpled tissue paper of the empty box, at the violets lying on the table.

"I don't understand," he said aloud, with a bewildered look.

CHAPTER VII

PROBABLY he never did understand. . . .

"I believe," John Morgan told his brother once, when they were talking it over, five or six years later—"I believe to this day he thinks she broke it off because of his father."

"And yet you told him—"

"Told him? I put it into words of three letters! But he looked perfectly blank. He said he hadn't told her about his father because 'it was so damnable. I knew she'd throw me over,' he said; 'and that's just what she's done.' 'Man alive,' I said, 'don't you see? It was up to you to give her the chance to throw you over!' All he said was, 'Of course, if I had known

that she knew it, I could have told her.'"

"Good Lord!" said the Judge, with a groan. "They say we all have a blind spot. I suppose honor is poor Vail's."

"And yet," Nina's father ruminated, "he's a good enough chap; he is a really attractive chap. I hear he's doing very well—got that big grain-elevator contract in Seattle. Everybody likes him—probably even his wife."

"Let's see. It was three years afterward that he married, wasn't it?"

John Morgan nodded. "Just under three years. Some Western girl."

"I have never been able to make up my mind as to how Nina felt about his marriage," the Judge ruminated.

"Neither have I," his brother said. "Of course she never winced. Nina is game. But nobody knows what went on inside. Olly, I'm not sure that we ought to have let her turn him down.

After all—lots of men keep their tongues between their teeth when it comes to making a clean breast of things to their girls."

"Yes," the Judge admitted; "but this sort of thing was different. Johnny, if she'd married him, she would have been sure to run up against his father in him. Secrecy! And you know Nina; she's as candid as the sun. She couldn't have stood it. For my part, I'm glad she found him out in time."

John Morgan got up and threw his half-smoked cigar into the fireplace. "I'd like to see her married," he said, sadly; "I'd like to see her with half a dozen kids of her own. She'd be happier. She isn't the girl she was, Olly. She's—changed; saddened. And there was nothing really bad about him! Yes, I *think* I'd rather she'd married him."

"I wouldn't," said the Judge, cheerfully. "You say even the Western wife likes him? Johnny, my boy, how do you

know? Unless she's hopelessly dull and adoring, I bet she's been jarred once or twice. No, sir! When it comes to marriage, the foundation-stone has got to be truth. Petty secrecies may not land you in the divorce court, but they don't make for connubial bliss! Nina did well to turn him down."

"I don't know — I don't know," Nina's father said, sighing.

"*I* know," said the Judge. "Come, brace up! You'll have a bully son-in-law one of these days!"

"I doubt it," John Morgan said.

THE END

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